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A Region in a Mobile World:
Integration of Southeastern sub-Himalayan Region into the Global Capitalist
Economy (1820-1900)

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**A Region in a Mobile World: Integration of Southeastern sub-Himalayan Region
into the Global Capitalist Economy (1820-1900)**

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Abstract:

This essay considers the history of two commodities, tea in Georgian England and opium in imperial China, with the objective of explaining the connected histories in the Eurasian landmass. It suggests that an exploration of connected histories in the Eurasian landmass can adequately explain the process of integration of southeastern sub-Himalayan region into the global capitalist economy. In doing so, it also brings the historiography of so called “South Asia” and “East Asia” into a dialogue and opens a way to interrogate the narrow historiographical visions produced from area studies lenses. Furthermore, the essay revisits a debate in South Asian historiography that was primarily intended to reject Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system theory. While explaining the historical differences of southeastern sub-Himalayan region with peninsular India, Bengal, and northern India, this essay problematizes the South Asianists’ critiques of Wallerstein’s conceptual model.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

From 1986 onwards, historians of South Asia have expressed sharp disagreements with Immanuel Wallerstein's world system theory.¹ David Washbrook is the most notable voice in this conversation. Drawing on a wide range of examples from South Asia, Washbrook argued that the experiences of this geo-political region do not confirm Wallerstein's universalizing theory of history and the core-periphery model of the global capitalist economy. Washbrook problematized Wallerstein's conceptual model by criticizing the interpretation that South Asia is a "semi-periphery" within the world system. Washbrook argued that, from the time of its incorporation into the global capitalist economy, South Asia possessed "core-like features of manufacture and industry, banking and financial management, capital accumulation and bourgeois class formation, and strong state organization." Washbrook also identified periphery-like features in South Asia as the region witnessed "highly exploitative and labor-intensive economies of mining, planting, peasant farming and landlord rentierism."² Elsewhere, explaining the English East India Company's commercial expansion and the growth of

¹Immanuel Wallerstein conceptualized the world-system theory with a theoretical framework to understand the historical changes involved in the rise of the modern world. According to Wallerstein world-system refers to the inter-regional and transnational division of labor, which divides the world into core countries, semi-peripheral countries, and the peripheral countries. Core countries focus on higher skill, capital-intensive production, and the rest of the world focuses on low-skill, labor-intensive production and extraction of raw materials. Wallerstein argued that world system theory offers a comprehensive understanding of the external and internal manifestations of the modernization process and offers a room for analytical comparisons between different regions of the world. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1983). Also see *World System Analysis: An Introduction*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004). In 1986, Wallerstein spoke in a conference at Tuft University and specifically challenged the South Asianists to respond to his formulation of world system theory. The essay was later published in a collected volume. Immanuel Wallerstein, "World-Systems Analysis and Historical Particularity: Some Comments" in Sugata Bose ed. *South Asia and World Capitalism*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 21-26.

² David Washbrook, "South Asia, World System and World Capitalism", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 49 (3): (1990), p. 482.

military-fiscalism in South Asia, Washbrook argued, “in a certain sense colonialism was the logical outcome of South Asia’s own history of capitalistic development.”³

Simultaneously, a group of eminent historians of South Asia extrapolated Washbrook’s discontents with world system theory. David Ludden wrote an influential rejoinder by specifically focusing on examples from southern India. Ludden saw the scope of Wallerstein’s theory as strictly limited as world system theory “reduces the history of world capitalism to chronicles of a capitalist world economy based on European imperial expansion.”⁴ Ludden’s study of rural India’s relationship to world economy suggested that, capital transformed production relations in “Village India” before 1850 in certain ways that can only be partially explained by European activity. Furthermore, explaining the implications of the complex and “over-determined interactions among ‘internal’ and ‘external’ forces of change” in late pre-colonial India, Ludden argued that the world system theory does not take those into account. Furthermore, extending Ludden’s criticism, C. A. Bayly offered a set of complex interpretations through an examination of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century north India’s political economy. Bayly stressed the importance of the different levels of political and economic activities that existed between local specificities within India and the generalities of the international capitalist system.⁵ He also explained the creative and dynamic economic activities in the region between 1750 and 1820 to argue that there

³ David Washbrook, “Progress and Problems: South Asian Economic and Social History”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 22 (3): (1988), p. 76.

⁴ David Ludden, “World Economy and Village India, 1600-1900”, in Sugata Bose ed. *South Asia and World Capitalism*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 162-163.

⁵ C. A. Bayly, “Indigenous Social Formations and the ‘World System’: North India since c. 1700”, in Sugata Bose ed. *South Asia and World Capitalism*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 115-116.

were certain processes of appropriation by the colonialists as India was integrated into the global capitalist economy.

However, Washbrook, Ludden, and Bayly, in their single-minded pursuit of criticizing the world system theory, subscribe to certain assumed historical constructions such as the spatial imagination of “South Asia” and “India.” In other words, none of these historians felt the need to question the imaginary term “South Asia” by interrogating the complex and historically different political economies of different regions that comes under the ambit of this geo-political area. These historians contested world system theory based on the historical experiences of northern and peninsular India and arrived at broad generalizations without considering the diverse history of different other regions of “South Asia.” From the beginning of British colonial expansion to the end of colonial occupation, the territoriality of British India was in a state of flux. The processes of integration of different regions of “South Asia” into the global capitalist economy were also distinctly different. The geo-political region that is generally identified through the umbrella term “South Asia” shares many historical differences and they deserve careful explanation. The term “South Asia,” which came out of the American area studies programs, also puts the shared historical relationships between “South” and “East Asia” into oblivion. Unfortunately, Washbrook, Ludden, and Bayly do not pay any attention to such historical particularities and differences. Instead, they collectively produced a body of historiography that does not subscribe to the specific historical experiences of every region that is technically a part of “India” and “South Asia.” To put it another way, the conversation of the South Asianists with Immanuel Wallerstein obfuscates the fact that the present territoriality of India is an imperial formation. Simultaneously, this body of

historiography systematically reifies the imaginary term “South Asia.” This essay contests such historiographical practices of reifying “South Asia” as an area with shared commonalities while trying to answer a straightforward question: Why and how was southeastern sub-Himalayan India, or present northeast India, integrated into the global capitalist economy?

Historically, what differentiates southeastern sub-Himalayan region from the rest of India was the region’s particularly underdeveloped state of pre-colonial economic institutions and financial systems. It is important to recognize that this region was not touched by the economic activities of Indian Ocean trade. The trade through the South-West Silk Road which connected Bengal, Chittagong, Manipur, Burma and Yunnan were also insignificant for almost two centuries prior to British colonization of this region.⁶ Furthermore, the pre-colonial economy of this region was only partially monetized. For instance, till the beginning of the nineteenth century, the pre-colonial Ahom rulers of the Brahmaputra valley called as *Swargedeos*, collected taxes in the form of manual labor from their subjects.⁷ Moreover, prior to British colonization, multiple forms of political authority occupied the landmass between the eastern limits of the Ganga and the western limits of the Mekong. Apart from the very loosely organized small states, there were various monastic guilds in the region organized along sectarian lines. These guilds depended on the manual labor of their disciples and managed to accumulate considerable

⁶ James A. Anderson, “China’s South Western Silk Road in World History”, World History Connected, 6 (1), Web: <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/6.1/anderson.html>, extracted on 14 January, 2015.

⁷ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1991) p. 39-61.

wealth.⁸ Therefore, unlike the *Diwani* of Bengal, the pre-colonial revenue administration of southeastern sub-Himalayan region was not organized under some unitary system. In fact, this resulted into serious administrative confusions during the early years of British colonization. When the East India Company officials established a fiscal state in the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak valley, the region was very thinly populated. This was a stark contrast when it comes to the pre-colonial demographic pattern in Bengal and northern India. As a result, during the processes of colonization, the East India Company's "political and cultural confrontation, conflict, and compromise" in northeast India was of lesser intensity compared to the developments in Bengal and northern India.⁹

However, the environmental conditions of southeastern sub-Himalayan region were difficult for the smooth functioning of East India Company's fiscal-state. The tributaries of the two major rivers Brahmaputra and Barak crisscrossed its valleys. During the monsoon season, recurrent flood in both the valleys often resulted into the administrative mismatch between the revenue assessments and the actual turnover.¹⁰

Moreover, when the scheme of colonization first began in the early nineteenth century,

⁸ Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages and Memories of Northeast India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 36-40. Also see "Monastic Governmentality, Colonial Misogyny, and Postcolonial Amnesia in South Asia", *History of Present: A Journal of Critical History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 2013): p. 57-58.

⁹ I state this in contrast to Sudipta Sen's observation on the foundation of an *Empire of Free Trade* in Bengal and northern India. In that specific context Sen argues that, "rather than being just a mechanistic structure of inevitable economic dominance and subservience between the industrializing core and the underdeveloped periphery the results" of East India Company's "expansion can be seen legitimately in the light of political and cultural confrontation, conflict, and compromise that set the context of such economic change." Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 3. C. A. Bayly also covers almost the same ground in his meticulous study of north Indian market places. C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)

¹⁰ Gunnell Cederlof offers a detailed discussion on administrative speculations and environmental disasters during the early phase of colonization in northeast India. Gunnell Cederlof, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontier: Climate Commerce and Polity 1790-1840*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.17-44.

this region was densely forested and, there were very few routes for mobility of people and exchange of goods. While trying to explain the integration of southeastern sub-Himalayan India into the global capitalist economy one must recognize these historical differences and particularities that determined the mode of colonial expansion in the region.

The recent scholarship on the southeastern sub-Himalayan India has begun to question the peculiar spatial geography of the region but the economic historians are yet to explain the place of region in the history of global capitalist economy.¹¹ The hitherto existing historiography on southeastern sub-Himalayan region tends to remain regionally focused and does not adequately explain the global connections of the region.¹² Keeping this historiographical lack in mind, this paper seeks to locate the history of this region in the global history of capitalism. I plan to explain this by looking at the social life of two commodities namely opium and tea. I shall explain how a set of related events in the early decades of nineteenth century led the way to the founding of a British tea industry first in the Brahmaputra valley and, then in the neighboring areas, with capital directly invested from metropolitan London. I argue that the growing popularity of tea in Georgian England and the increasing consumption of opium in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century imperial China set the context of integration of northeast India into the global capitalist economy. In other words, this essay locates southeastern sub-Himalayan India in the triangular trade of opium and tea between India, China, and Britain. While

¹¹ For discussions on spatial history of southeastern sub-Himalayan region see Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeast India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), David Ludden, "Where is Assam? Using Geographical History to Locate Current Social Realities," Sanjib Baruah ed. *CENISEAS Papers 1*. (Guwahati: Centre for Northeast India South and Southeast Asia Studies, OKD Institute of Social Change and Development 2003.)

¹² Examples of regionally focused historiographical practices include Guha (1997, 1991), Saikia (2000), Saikia (2011), Kar (2007) and Sharma (2011).

explaining that, it brings the histories of “South Asia” and “East Asia” into a dialogue and opens a way to interrogate the narrow historiographical visions produced from area studies lenses.

Chapter 2: Imperial connections and the social life of tea and opium

European invasion of Asian market reorganized the regional trade relations within Asia both via land and sea. Imperialism introduced novel forms of exchange relations within the regional economy of Asia wherein European traders emerged as the beneficiaries of the new found economic dynamism. In the nineteenth century colonial empires, most notably the British Empire created regional interdependencies in Asia. British imperial connections intensified some of the “old relationships” and generated “new linkages between the cities (and hinterlands) of Aden, Bombay, Calcutta, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai as entrepôts and financial centers for Asian trade.”¹³ When it comes to production and exchange of tea and opium, the British imperial connections played the most crucial role. Imperial connections determined the development of social life of tea in England and opium in China. This section explains this development through an exploration of the connected histories in the Eurasian landmass.

Tea as a commodity was in use in China since the fifth century but it began its social life in Europe only at the turn of the sixteenth century. Tea was first introduced in Britain as an exotic drink from the East with high medicinal values. In 1598, a Dutch voyager and geographer Jan Huyghen van Linschoten introduced Japanese tea culture in English print. In an exaggerated tone Linschoten informed the English readers that irrespective of the seasons Japanese drank tea after every meal, and it was a much-

¹³ Prasenjit Duara, “Asia Redux: Conceptualising a Region for Our Times”, *The Journal of Asia Studies*, Vol.69, (4), p. 964.

esteemed drink among the Easterners.¹⁴ Twelve years later, the Dutch East India Company brought the first shipment of tea from China and Japan to Amsterdam and marketed the commodity across the channel.¹⁵ Back then tea was an expensive novelty in Britain for those who could afford it. However, by the middle of the seventeenth century, tea was introduced in the coffee houses of London and there was a steady increase of tea consumption.

In the 1660s, the culture of tea drinking also found royal patronage in England through the mediation of the Portuguese Princess Catherine of Braganza who was married to Charles II. The development of tea drinking among the elite circles also coincided with the euphoria of restoration of the monarchy in 1660 that ended the austerity of the Commonwealth. Historian John Burnett observed that different social groups associated themselves differently with the burgeoning culture of tea drinking. Tea drinking became a part of the “paraphernalia of gentility in the highest circles.”¹⁶ At the same time, it also appealed to the emerging commercial and professional classes for whom it “represented values of sobriety, serious purpose, trustworthiness and respectability.”¹⁷ As tea drinking gained popularity and its consumption increased significantly, by 1689 British East India Company began to import tea directly from China. In 1721, the House of Commons granted the company a monopoly over the tea trade to facilitate a steady supply of the commodity.

¹⁴ Helen Saberi, *Tea: A Global History*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), p. 86.

¹⁵ Saberi, *Tea: A Global History*, p.91.

¹⁶ John Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures: A Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p.50.

¹⁷ Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures*, p. 50.

By the 1740s, tea became a more affordable beverage for the English working-class. Between the 1720s and 1740s, the rates of duty on tea were gradually decreased, resulting a price fall of the commodity. Furthermore, compared to coffee, the process of preparing tea was cheaper. Those who followed the Chinese customary way could drink tea in a dilute form without mixing either milk or sugar.¹⁸ However, tea mixed with sugar became more popular among the English working class as Britain had a steady supply of sugar from its Caribbean colonies. In other words, sugar supplemented tea consumption. Speaking about the parallel development of sugar and tea consumption John Burnett noted the average retail prices of sugar in Britain gradually fell between 1720 and 1740, offering a huge relief to working-class consumers of tea.¹⁹ In short, by mid eighteenth century the social life of tea in Britain became stable across the classes.

However, the supply of tea to the home market was not flowing from Britain's own colonies. The English East India Company's purchasing power of tea at the Chinese base of Canton was dependent on the silver flowing from the New World. Under the circumstances, the Company officials diverted their attention towards Indian opium, which they planned to exchange for Chinese tea. In 1765, the British East India Company acquired the *Diwani* grants from the Mughal Emperor that offered the Company regime the right to collect taxes from the areas of Bengal, Orissa, and Bihar. Within a span of few years, the Company officials at Fort William, Calcutta put their efforts to take over the trade of opium produced in Patna. Subsequently, in 1773, the British colonial administration abolished free trade in opium. In other words, production and sale of

¹⁸ John Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures: A Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p.54.

¹⁹ Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures*, p.55.

opium thereafter became solely a concern of the Fort William. In 1797 the Company regime modified this system and transformed Bengal opium into a direct state monopoly.²⁰ Through the new system they could regulate “the quantity and quality of production, stabilized prices at high levels and consistently undercut or assimilated other sources of international competition” for the sale of opium in the Chinese market.²¹ However, the Company took a cautious stand and decided to let the private traders run the risk of supplying the drug and dealing with the possible tensions that could arise at the Chinese port of Lintin from where most of the smuggling was conducted.

By the turn of the eighteenth century opium trade between Calcutta and Lintin flourished. In the year 1800, approximately 4,000 chests of opium were auctioned at Calcutta. By 1808-1809 this figure stood at 4,560 chests and, by 1809-10 it reached a high of 5,000 chests.²² This rise in exports of Patna opium to China created an opportunity for the other opium producing regions in India. Poppy was extensively grown in several parts of western and central India. In fact, from 1770 onward, without the cognizance of the British East India Company, the Dutch East India Company was conducting a trade in opium between Malwa in western India and Java. In 1820, the officials at Calcutta discovered some revealing information on Malwa opium. There were significant advantages of Malwa opium over that of the Patna variety because of the climatic conditions of the region. Soon the Board of Customs, Salt and Opium in Bengal conducted a survey and discovered that Chinese consumers could get 75% of pure extract

²⁰Amar Farooqui, *Smuggling as Subversion: Colonialism, Indian Merchants and the Politics of Opium*, (New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, 1998), p. 12.

²¹J. F. Richards, “The Indian Empire and Peasant Production of Opium in the Nineteenth Century”, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1981), p. 61.

²²Amar Farooqui, *Smuggling as Subversion: Colonialism, Indian Merchants and the Politics of Opium*, (New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, 1998), p. 13.

from Malwa opium whereas it stood at 57% for the Patna variety. The moisture present in the air often affected the Bengal opium. Moreover, the Malwa opium cakes were small and flat which made it convenient for smuggling.²³ As these assessments were completed, the Company administration put concerted efforts towards monopolizing the opium trade in western India as well.

In 1818, following the Third Anglo-Maratha war, the East India Company gained territorial control in western India. By then Malwa opium was already well entrenched in the market.²⁴ After 1820, the Company regime therefore, concentrated on various Indian-ruled states in the Gujarat region with the aim of keeping a check on transit of Malwa opium. In 1823, the Company administration reconstituted its opium policy. The new policy involved arrangements with rulers of opium producing areas of central India and Rajasthan, under which the “British government of India was to purchase from these states a specified quantity of opium annually at a stated price, and not in a free market any longer.”²⁵ At the same time, these states were asked to limit the quantity of production in the respective areas so that secret networks of transit could get be automatically regulated. Thus, by 1823, the company administration in India completed the necessary steps to monopolize the Indian opium trade.

As the smuggled opium from India entered the Chinese market, new forms of sociality developed around the commodity. Recent historiography on the culture of

²³Tan Chung, “The Britain-China-India Trade Triangle (1771-1840)”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 11, (4), 1974, p. 418.

²⁴In the season 1817-18, nearly 1828 chests of Malwa opium were exported from the Daman port. Amar Farooqui, *Smuggling as Subversion: Colonialism, Indian Merchants and the Politics of Opium*, (New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, 1998), p. 16.

²⁵C.U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treatises, Engagements and Sanads Relating to India and Neighboring Countries*, p.19.

opium consumption in China has successfully challenged the notion that China was adversely affected by the “forceful” introduction of opium. From the eighteenth century onwards, the spread of opium in China depended on “the discovery of an entirely novel mode of delivery: smoking.”²⁶ The owners of the smoking houses in China began to prepare a special blend called *madak* by mixing opium with tobacco. Of course, *madak* was priced much higher than pure tobacco. Especially, Patna opium became an exotic commodity and “an object for connoisseurship” for wealthy scholars and rich merchants. Explaining the new consumption habits of opium in the early nineteenth-century China, Frank Dikotter, Lars Laamann and Xun Zhou observed that, “opium smoking progressed down the social scale”, and “it gradually became a popular marker of male sociality.” Moreover, within the households, opium emerged as a “vector of hospitality and the ‘welcome smoke’ (*yingchou*) offered to guests,” which with time “became an indispensable aspect of social etiquette with failure to offer opium considered a serious *faux pas*.”²⁷ Furthermore, opium marked its presence also among the underprivileged classes of Chinese society. Smoking was considered as a collective experience and an occasion for social intercourse.

As the social life of tea in Britain and, opium in China was well settled by the early decades of nineteenth century, the English East India Company made unprecedented financial gains. However, there were many stakeholders in the India-China opium trade. Britain’s trade with India and China was conducted through the small private agency houses that began to flourish in the first three decades of the nineteenth

²⁶ Frank Dikotter, Lars Laamann and Xun Zhou, “China, British Imperialism and the Myth of the Opium Plague,” in James H. Mills and Patricia Barton ed. *Drugs and Empires: Essays in Modern Imperialism and Intoxication, c. 1500-c. 1930*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 23.

²⁷ Dikotter, Laamann and Zhou, “China, British Imperialism and the Myth of the Opium Plague”, p.25.

century. The so called Agency Houses were primarily trading houses who also acted as bankers, bill brokers, ship owners, freighters, insurance agents and purveyors. They maintained close financial and commercial connections with their branches across geographically distant locations. Unlike the East India Company, they were not joint-stock companies but they were the means of establishing partnerships among individuals that could continue to remain functional even if their partners died. Michael Greenberg observed that an agency house was a “many sided edifice. It was a structure well able to adapt itself to every line of growth, every avenue of remuneration which the China trade offered; and yet capable of bearing the stress of that extreme tension which the ‘opening’ of China was to involve.”²⁸ The agency houses took great advantage of this system, and partnerships like Reid Beale & Co., Remington Crawford & Co., Jardine Matheson & Co. etc. gradually became powerful enough in Asian trade to work against the interests of the English East India Company.

In the 1820s, the private merchants were becoming increasingly influential at Canton base causing threats to the monopoly of the English East India Company. During the initial years of Britain’s China trade, the private trading firms and the East India Company were able to coexist as their trade moved in different spheres. However, the rapid growth of country trade in the partnership between the independent traders and the Chinese Hong merchants disrupted the balance and produced a divergence of interest. As the competition between the East India Company and the private merchants escalated at Canton, reactions began to emerge from the British manufacturers as well. The private merchants incessantly lobbied against the Company’s monopoly. From 1829 onward, the

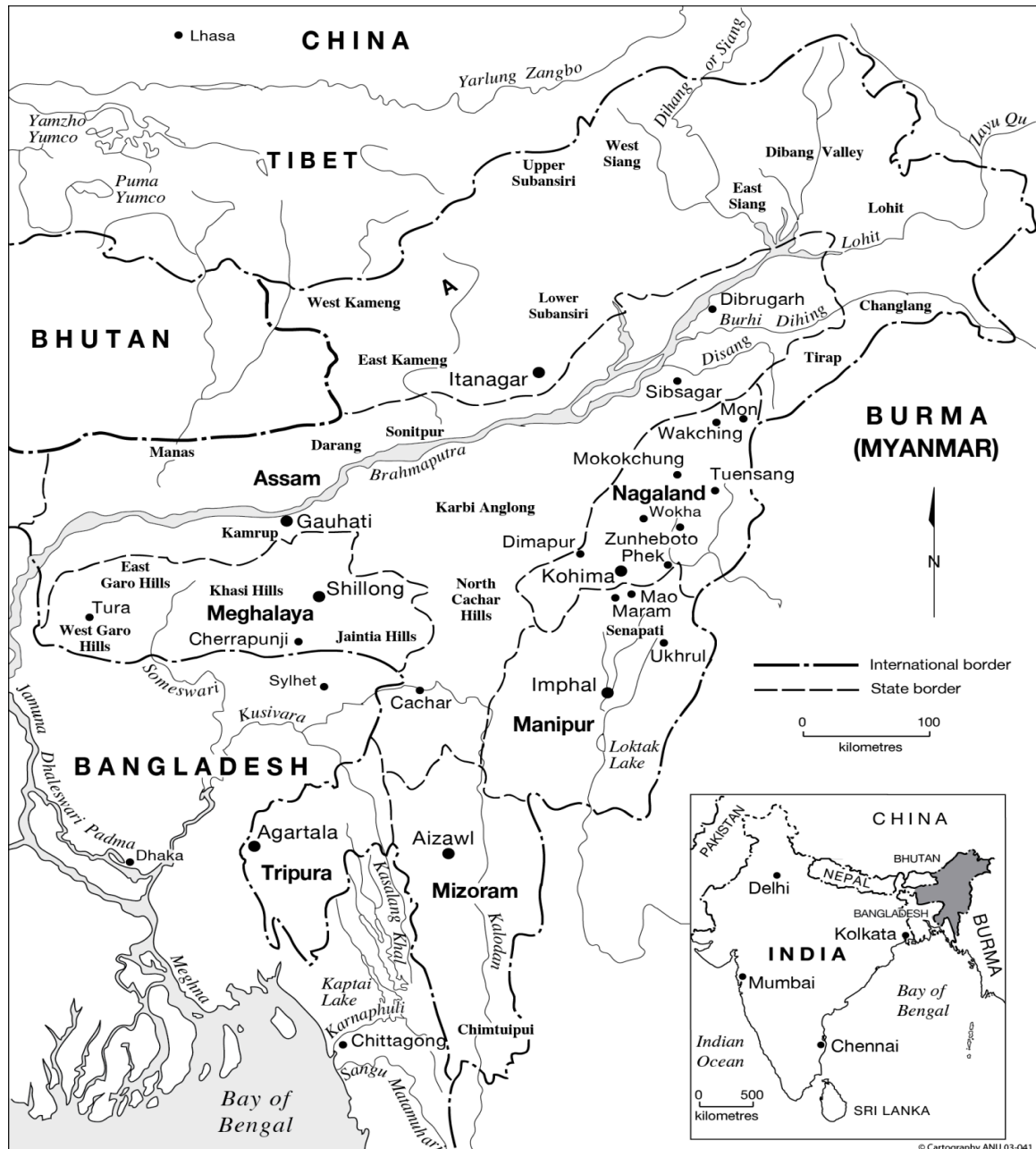
²⁸ Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China, 1800-1842*, p. 146.

campaign against the East India Company's monopoly began in earnest as the British manufactures from Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Bristol, Birmingham and Leeds collectively demanded the parliament to open the China trade for sale of all kinds of goods. They also emphasized on the need to lower the prices of tea for British consumers, which they suggested, couldn't be achieved until and unless East India Company's monopoly was not terminated.²⁹ This struggle between British manufactures and the English East India Company continued throughout 1831-32, and finally, in 1833, the Company's monopoly in eastern trade came to an end. But by then the East India Company regime in India had made considerable advance in expanding its frontier further east from Bengal. The imperial gaze beyond the eastern limits of the Ganga was at the heart of the company's interest in the Chinese markets.

²⁹ Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China, 1800-1842*, p. 184.

Chapter 3: The land beyond Bengal and the imperial gaze

The landmass beyond the eastern limits of the Ganga, one that connects Bengal to Burma and China, is presently called as northeast India. Keeping the Himalayas as a reference point this area can also be called as southeastern sub-Himalayan region. To put



Map 1: Present map of Northeast India. Source: CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

it in the area studies vocabulary, northeast India is the crossroad between so called “South Asia” and “Southeast Asia.” However, the term northeast India is a contingent signifier commonly used to suit the statist vocabulary of the present Indian nation-state. In the British colonial archive, northeast India was often identified as Assam. At the same time, the word Assam appears under different labels in modern cartographic practices with respect to time. The present northeast India is constituted of eight different states of Indian nation state, namely, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and Mizoram. This region presently shares international borders with Nepal, Bhutan, China, Burma, and Bangladesh. Interestingly, northeast India shares its borders mostly with other nation-states rather than with India. Discussing the peculiar spatiality of the region amidst many nation-states, recent scholarship has pointed out, “...how we might locate social realities in multiple, changing, and mobile spaces that impart to territories like Assam in kaleidoscopic appearance, open to many disparate interpretations and analytical approaches, in the fullness of time, that is, in the fulsome context of history in the short term, long term, ancient past, immediate present, and currently unfolding future.”³⁰ In other words, present northeast India is a referent to narratives of changing political regimes, territorial reconfigurations, and making and unmaking of modern nation-states.

During the pre-colonial times, present northeast India was not integrated into the Mughal administrative structures. In the early decades of nineteenth century, when the English East Company began its colonization scheme in this region, the policies of the

³⁰ David Ludden in his recent work focuses on the spatial geography of northeast India. This is a significant shift from Ludden’s earlier scholarship. David Ludden, “Where is Assam? Using Geographical History to Locate Current Social Realities”, (CENISEAS Papers 1: Sanjib Baruah Series Editor) Guwahati: Centre for Northeast India South and Southeast Asia Studies, OKD Institute of Social Change and Development, 2003, 1-2.

Company regime at Calcutta lacked clarity. However, the Company administration had a fairly good sense of the region's connected geography. They were also interested in the possibilities of navigation in the region. An early account, commissioned by the Company office at Calcutta, described Assam's geography and demography as follows:

Assam is that extensive tract of country on either side of the Brahmaputra; stretching on the N. shore from the river Monash (sic) opposite Goalpara, and on the S. from Nughurbera hill, about 16 miles above Goalpara, to the foot of the Himalayan mountains (sic) close upon the western boundary of China. On the N. it is bounded by a cold mountainous country inhabited by Booteas, Akas, Duphlas, Koppachors, Miris, Abors, and Mishmis; the first being most westward, and others eastward in succession; Kangtis, Bor-Kantis, Singphos and Muamarias, separate it on the extreme east from China and Burma; the Munniporis, Nagas, Mikirs, Cacharis, Kassyas and Garrows from our possessions in Sylhet on the south; while it is connected on the west with Bengal, by the Zillah Goalpara, late N. E. Rungpore. Though geographically speaking, Assam terminates at the river Monash, yet the same peculiar country borders the Brahmaputra as far as Jumalpoore: has (sic) the same climate, and the same change of seasons. Assam may properly be called the valley of the Brahmaputra, navigable branches intersect it in every possible direction, and there is perhaps not a spot of habituated (sic) ground so situated, as to be more than a convenient distance from some navigable stream.³¹

In other words, before colonization there was no clear marker of state boundaries in the region. The boundaries were defined based on the natural geography of the area. This early colonial gaze on Assam reflects on two distinct concerns of the Company regime. Firstly, this narrative explained the geographical connection that Assam shares with Bengal and China. In other words, it showed the connections of Bengal with China and Burma via land. Secondly, the narrative suggestively pointed out the potential navigable channels. After all, navigation was an important concern for trade.

However, this account offered an oversimplified view of the river system in the region that needs to be explained in greater details. Two major rivers flow through northeast India. The Brahmaputra, which flows southwest through Assam, originates in

³¹ John M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1837), p. 1-2.



Map 2: Map of Burma (1827). Source: Perry-Castañeda Library map collection, University of Texas at Austin.

the Angsi Glacier in Tibet. In Tibet, the river is called as the Yarlung Tsangpo. Yarlung Tsangpo flows through southern Tibet, and veers abruptly before entering northeast India. In northeast India, the river is called as the Brahmaputra. Finally, the Brahmaputra enters into eastern Bengal or present day Bangladesh, where is it called as Jamuna. The Brahmaputra in Assam has over two dozen tributaries that flow through both the northern and the southern bank of the river valley. Barak, the other major river of the region, originates in the Manipur Hills. The river flows southwest through Manipur and enters Mizoram. Then it veers abruptly northward and enters southern part of Assam before flowing into eastern part of Bengal. The principal tributaries of Barak are: Jiri, Dhaleswari, Singla, Longai, Sonai and Katakhal. Furthermore, Chindwin, a tributary of Irrawaddy River flows through Manipur before entering Bengal. In other words, the tributaries of the Brahmaputra, Barak, and Irrawaddy separate the landmass of southeastern sub-Himalayan region. Besides the river valleys, a hilly region, which is an easterly continuation of the Himalayas, separates the Brahmaputra valley from the Irrawaddy valley in Burma. During the monsoon season, the percentage of rainfall in this region is very high. The early colonial reports very often suggested that excessive rainfall led to annual floods in the region causing damage to property and life.

Furthermore, during the early years of colonization, northeast India was thickly forested and the population density of the region was very low. In the colonial gaze, the first impression of the region was that, “The appearance of the country is very different from that of most others in India.”³² From 1790 onward, the East India Company made efforts to march further east from the Bengal plains. Gunnel Cederlof observed that the

³² John M’Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, p. 3.

Company officials viewed nature in this region in two different ways: nature as an unpredictable threat which was destructive and, nature as viewed by the surveys: areas for possible “entrepreneurship and commerce.”³³ Discussing the forests and the wildlife of the region, an officer serving in the Bengal Native Infantry described the region as a territory consisted of “jungle, woods, and hills, which are tenanted by few human beings.” It further suggested that the region was “overrun by elephants, buffaloes, rhinoceroses, tigers, wild boars, and deer, or infested with crocodiles and boa-constrictors, and other colossal denizens—quadruped and reptilian—of an intertropical (sic) luxuriance of marsh and forest,” and these areas were “scarcely inhabitable.”³⁴ Such mode of narration was very common in almost all early colonial accounts. Even if one ignores the perverse gaze of the colonial officials, these reports confirm that the region was indeed thickly forested. The reports also suggested that the mountainous area of the region, the “forest clad hills and rocks,” were “equally difficult to access,” and “like the plains”, very “thinly peopled.”³⁵ To put it differently, when the East India Company decided to expand its territory further east of Bengal, they entered a thinly populated, thickly forested terrain of hills and river valleys; a terrain which was quite different from Bengal and northern India and it was difficult to navigate.

Moreover, recent scholarship on northeast India has shown us the colonial administrators lacked knowledge on the pre-colonial social and political authorities in northeast India. The Company officials were aware of the *Ahom* rulers of the Brahmaputra valley, and their assumption was that the *Ahom* king, called as the

³³ Gunnel Cederlof, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontier: Climate Commerce and Polity 1790-1840*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 19.

³⁴ *The Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, July, 1847, p. 308.

³⁵ *The Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, July, 1847, p. 308.

Swargadeo, was the dominant political authority of the region. However, the overlapping nature of political and social authorities of the region was little known to the colonial officials at Fort William. Ironically, such false perception later got transposed into the nationalist historiography of the twentieth century as well. Disrupting the comfort of colonial and nationalist historiography, Indrani Chatterjee has shown us that, between the second and the eighteenth centuries, “a form of political society located in the household” gradually developed and strengthened in this region. These societies were basically monastic guilds constituted of “an eminent or skilled teacher and his coresidential disciple or student.”³⁶ Chatterjee called those as “monastic governments,” and argued that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they “anchored discrete but intertwined geographies—one cosmological and the other territorial, political and socioeconomic.”³⁷ Through a careful act of excavation, Chatterjee wove an alternative narrative of circulation of wealth in these networks with specific focus on the household economy. However, the religious traditions and ritual practices of these monastic lineages were different from one another. Furthermore, the monastic heads could also influence the armed military authorities of the region. For instance, in 1769, due to the vested interests of the different monastic teachers in the political authorities of the region, an intra-sectarian war occurred in the Brahmaputra valley. This war sporadically continued for more than three decades, and it is now known as the Moamoria Rebellion.

The context of the Moamoria Rebellion figures prominently in the colonial records but it appears only as a rebellion led by the followers of Moamoria monastic order

³⁶ Indrani Chatterjee, “Monastic Governmentality, Colonial Misogyny, and Postcolonial Amnesia in South Asia”, *History of Present: A Journal of Critical History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 2013), p. 56.

³⁷ Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages and Memories of Northeast India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 36-38.

against the ruling Ahom *Swargadeo*. During this intra-sectarian war, the tributary chieftains under the Ahom *Swargadeo* had declared independence, and it disrupted cultivation and trade in the area between Bengmara and Guwahati. The rebels also attacked the royal palace at Gargaon. The *Ahom Swargadeo* left Gargaon and took shelter at Guwahati, in western Assam. Under these circumstances, in 1792, Captain Thomas Welsh of the Bengal Native Infantry led the first British military expedition in the Brahmaputra valley, which the officials at Fort William justified as an effort to reinstate the power of the Ahom *Swargadeo* in the valley.



Map 3: “Ahom Kingdom-1826,” Mohammad Taher, in “Assam: An Introduction”, in A.K. Bhagwati ed. *Geography of Assam*, (New Delhi: Rajesh Publications), p. 2.

However, Welsh did not have any idea about the complex political realities on the ground. In the space between the Brahmaputra valley and the neighboring region of northern Burma, there were concurrent sovereign powers, which were competing for control of the area. The contemporary economic and political developments in Burma had a direct impact in the Brahmaputra valley and Manipur. Explaining the contestation among different political powers in the region, Bodhisattva Kar argued that, what appeared to “the Europeans as “a confused sea of forest-clad hills and narrow valleys” now and then intercepted with river streams, was dotted with numerous state and non-state spaces with fluctuating boundaries and reversible destinies.”³⁸ Very often, economic reasons were at the center of such political contestations. Both the Brahmaputra valley and the Irrawaddy valley were suitable for wet-rice cultivation. As the local population depended on wet rice cultivation, the demographic patterns as well as shifts in the region were caused by people’s quest for cultivable land. In the late eighteen and early nineteenth century, the Burmese intermittently made efforts to expand their agrarian frontier by aggressively marching towards Manipur and the Brahmaputra valley. Bodhisattva Kar explained this in the following manner:

Located in the fertile rice-growing basin of Kyaukse, Ava emerged as the strongest political alternative to Pegu after the seventeenth-century commercial crisis in the coastal trade circuit. From the middle of the eighteenth century, its command of the dwindling agricultural core of the dry zone was reinforced by the valuable control of the Mu River irrigation system, focused at Shwebo. The Konbaungs who brought about the valley-wide integration of the Irrawaddy after overthrowing the Toungoos at Ava in 1752 were insistent on pushing the frontiers of state space beyond the immediate valley complex. As Mon resistance and shrunken commerce restricted the Burman expansion in the delta area in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Ava eyed the neighboring wet-rice producing formations stretching across from the Mekong through the Brahmaputra (collectively known as the Shan states to the

³⁸ Bodhisattva Kar, “Framing Assam: Plantation Capital, Metropolitan Knowledge, and a Regime of Identities, 1790s - 1930s”, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2007, (Unpublished PhD dissertation), p. 27.

British), the long and narrow littoral beyond the Yoma range (shown as Arakan on the European maps).³⁹

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Manipur faced some adverse consequences of these developments at Ava. The armies from Ava repeatedly invaded the Kangla domain between 1753 and 1764, and “succeeded in carrying off an unusually large number of skilled inhabitants to resettle them as hereditary crown servants at Ava, apart from snatching much of the available wealth on the way.”⁴⁰ Thereafter, forces from Ava routinely invaded Manipur. In 1782, the area ruled by Maharaja Bhagyachandra of Manipur was eventually forced to become a feudatory of Ava. Similar invasions of Ava into the areas of Cachar and the Brahmaputra valley acquired momentum in the second decade of the nineteenth century. In 1817, the Ava army invaded Cachar and Heramba causing tension to the British officials. The matters became worse in 1822, when six British subjects were taken as hostage by the Burmese.

While such aggressive military expeditions continued under the directions of the court of Ava at Cachar, there emerged an internal political conflict within the Ahom court. In 1811, Chandrakanta Singha became the new Ahom *Swargadeo*. However, his ascendancy to the throne was not acceptable to all. By 1817, Purandar Singha, a powerful minister within the Ahom court, conspired against Chandrakanta Singha to dethrone the *Swargadeo*. A group of ministers under the leadership of Badanchandra Barphukan also supported Purandar Singha. But this plot was soon discovered. The Ahom *Swargadeo* Chandrakanta Singha ordered the arrest of Barphukan. But, Barphukan escaped to Guwahati and then, reached Ava travelling via Calcutta to seek help from the Burmese

³⁹ Bodhisattva Kar, “Framing Assam”, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Bodhisattva Kar, “Framing Assam”, p. 31.

king Bodawpaya. The Burmese army took advantage of the situation and, crossed over the Patkai range to enter the erstwhile Brahmaputra valley. Describing this invasion Bodhisattva Kar observed that it did not “take much time for the disgruntled local elites of the Brahmaputra Valley to realize how helpless they were in terms of technology and manpower against the vast war machine of Ava.”⁴¹ Thereafter, the only possible source of patronage that the Ahom lords could seek was the British in Calcutta. Purandar Singha was cunning enough to take advantage of this situation. His ultimate ambition was to gain control of the Brahmaputra valley with the help of the British. In September 1819, he petitioned the Governor General at Calcutta seeking for intervention. In other words, Purandar Singha offered the Company regime at Calcutta an opportunity for which they were eagerly waiting for. Soon, the Bengal Native Infantry joined Purandar Singh’s army. In May 1820, Purandar Singha defeated Chandrakant’s forces at Bijni. By the end of 1821, Purandar Singh’s army appeared triumphant over the invading army of Ava.

But, by the summer of 1822, a strong reinforcement of 20,000 men arrived from Ava. The Burmese army, led by Mungee Maha Bandula, established their base at Rangpur and occupied the Brahmaputra valley once again. After this defeat, Purandar Singha sought refuge at Calcutta. Soon, Mungee Maha Bandula sent a strong message to Calcutta stating that the war would continue until and unless the fugitive Ahom *Swargadeo* Purandar Singha was not handed over to the Burmese army. This message created a sense of concern among the East India Company officials at Calcutta. They launched a military offense and the first Anglo-Burmese War began by early 1824. The Ava troops lost heavily in the two years long war. In February 1826, the English East

⁴¹Bodhisattva Kar, “Framing Assam”, p. 56.

India Company forced the court of Ava to sign a Treaty of Peace at Yandaboo whose articles stated that:

His Majesty the King of Ava renounces all claims upon, and will abstain from all future interference with, the Principality of Assam and its Dependencies, and also with the contiguous petty States of Cachar and Jyntia...To prevent all future disputes respecting the Boundary Line between the two great nations, the British Government will, retain the conquered Provinces of Arracan, including the four divisions of Arracan, Ramee, Cheduba, and Sandowey, and His Majesty the King of Ava Cedes all rights thereto.⁴²

However, the East India Company lacked preparations to directly administer the Brahmaputra valley. The Company regime therefore, decided to reinstate Purandar Singha as a tributary king of upper Assam for a period of ten years. The conditions for the last Ahom *Swargadeo* were tough as he was bound to deposit a tax of Rs. 50,000 to retain his throne. However, the East India Company appointed David Scott as the Commissioner of lower Assam. Initially, the Company regime intended to design its land revenue policies in Assam along the lines of Bengal. In Bengal, since 1793, the Company conducted the land revenue administration through the system of Permanent Settlement. The central premise of this “quasi-feudal” land settlement was to recognize property as the basic principle of government.⁴³ The Permanent Settlement was primarily a contract between the East India Company and the local Zamindars, the pre-colonial landholding class of Bengal. To ensure a steady flow of revenue, the Company regime adopted this policy wherein they utilized the traditional position of the Zamindars to run their new revenue administration. Subsequently, the codes of Permanent Settlement in Bengal not

⁴²“Treaty of peace with His Majesty the King of Ava” signed at Yandaboo on the 24th of February 1826, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, p. 1.

⁴³ Both Eric Stokes and Ranajit Guha has offered detailed accounts on the founding principles Bengal Permanent Settlement. Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarian and India*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*, (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1963), p. 18.

only framed the East India Company's relationship with land as a productive resource for revenue generation but it also laid out the foundation of their future administrative vision. As the Company put concerted efforts towards transforming the population in the Brahmaputra into fiscal subjects, David Scott was to perform the task of completing the land revenue assessments.

However, in an area like the Brahmaputra valley, a continuation of the Permanent Settlement was not possible. Unlike the *Diwani* of Bengal, there was no pre-existing unitary land revenue system in this region. For instance, in the areas ruled by the Ahom rulers, they followed the *pyke* system. Every single able-bodied male was considered as a *pyke*. Every year, for a period of three months, a *pyke* contributed his labor power in the service of the royal household. This was considered as his annual tax. However, a *pyke* could pay his taxes in another way. They could also serve in a monastery, for equal amount of time, as the monasteries had an alliance with the royal household. Apart from contributing three months of labor, a *pyke* was not liable to pay any tax for the land that he possessed for wet-rice cultivation.⁴⁴ In other words, two different forms of political authorities in the same area conducted the taxation regime in the *Ahom* ruled areas of the Brahmaputra valley. Due to such overlapping structures in the region, the East India Company struggled to identify a specific landholding class with whom the new regime could form an alliance.

Moreover, during the early years of colonization, the entire Northeast India was a thinly populated and densely forested region. The Company officials were literally dealing with a semi-submerged landscape because of the complex river system and the

⁴⁴ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*, (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1991), p. 39-61.

monsoon floods. At the same time, the complexity of the landscape was forged with the complicated web of networks and hierarchies that controlled the region. Discussing this process in the 1820s, Gunnel Cederlof has shown us that the Company regime confronted old conflicts over rivers, foothills, and market places as they acquired new territories. To resolve such conflicts the Company officials tried to create clearer territorial markers for themselves and engaged with other powers like the rulers of Manipur and Tripura. While settling territorial disputes, the officials tended to choose natural markers as boundaries. For instance, they dealt with the conflict between the rulers of Cachar and Tripura at Hailakandi on the banks of Dhalesawri River by demarcating the east-west division along the river. Gunnel Cederlof observed that, for the British, rivers “constituted an easily defended outer border, separating people by a line cutting through the landscape by which order could be upheld.”⁴⁵ In other words, early colonial policies in northeast India were highly contingent, and the processes of establishing administrative control in the region were quite arbitrary.

Furthermore, during the early years of colonization, the Company officials’ lack of familiarity with the difficult environmental conditions on the ground produced major upsets in the revenue administration. Natural calamities often disrupted the bureaucratic efforts towards regulating the land revenue system. Very often, “The Fiscal mechanism, the perpetual settlement, and a more general perception of large scale classification and essentialism immediately ran into a serious trouble from the fluid, shifting, non-equilibrium dynamics of the wet-land, river, grassland, and forest ecologies.”⁴⁶ As a result, the revenue speculations never matched with the real turnover. For instance, in places

⁴⁵ Gunnel Cederlof, *Founding an Empire on India’s North-Eastern Frontier: Climate Commerce and Polity 1790-1840*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 37.

⁴⁶ Cederlof, *Founding an Empire on India’s North-Eastern Frontier*, p. 156.

like Cachar, in spite of constant encouragements from the colonial administration, the local population failed to clear thick dense forests to practice settled cultivation. On top of that, unpredictable natural calamities such as monsoon floods intermittently upset planning and efforts.

However, the East India Company's policy to look eastward of Bengal was not solely guided by the objective of land acquisition and revenue generation. The Company regime was also putting its efforts towards connecting the Brahmaputra valley with Yunnan. In the 1820s, the imperial gaze was on the Chinese markets as the commercial value of those was already known in the official circles of the Company. Since the early days of the East India Company's trade with China, the 30 million people of Yunnan and Szechuan province used to send their goods via trade routes that were 1,200 to 1,500 miles long. Tea produced in Yunnan and Szechuan province could reach Canton after being transported through such long routes. On the other hand, the distance between Yunnan and Bhamo, a town on the bank of Irrawaddy River in Burma, was only 230 miles.⁴⁷ In other words, Yunnan, if connected through Bhamo via land, could have been geographically closer to the newly acquired British territories in the Brahmaputra valley. Even though the exact geographical details of these places were not known within the official circles of the English East India Company till 1868, the Company regime could at least imagine the tremendous commercial prospects of reopening the South-West Silk Road. The South-West Silk Road was mainly divided in three overland routes that connected Yunnan, upper Burma, Manipur, Chittagong, and Bengal. Gunnel Cederlof suggested that these routes held key roles in the East India Company's vision of

⁴⁷ A. Bowers, *Bhamo Expedition: Report on the Predictability of Re-Opening the Trade Route, between Burma and Western China*. (Rangoon: American Press, 1869) p. 8.

northeastern frontier in the early nineteenth century. The northern South-West Silk Road “entered Burma via the Taping River at Bhamo on the Irrawaddy and proceeded northwards via the market town of Mogoung to enter Upper Assam at the Patkoi Pass.”⁴⁸ As the East India Company expanded its territory towards northeast India along the Brahmaputra and Barak valley, they “sought to gain control of the nodal points in the old commercial networks.”⁴⁹ Certainly, to reopen this trade route was an important concern of the Company regime as it could establish their control on overland commercial flows from the Chinese markets. Writing in 1837, John M’Cosh, an assistant surgeon in the service of the East India Company, described the situation to his superiors at Calcutta in the following way:

There is an open road from Upper Assam into Burma, and thence into China, by which a considerable trade in Chinese and Burmese manufacturers is carried on. Indeed the Burmese in their invasions of Assam generally entered it by this route. The line of trade after leaving Suddia passes by Bisa across the Patkoye range of mountains and through the valley of Hoo-koong, to the town of Moon-koong, situated on a navigable branch of the Irrawaddi called Namyang. Merchants proceeding from Moon-koong to Ava at once descend the Irrawaddi to the capital; while those to China ascend the Irrawaddi for many miles, to a place called Cat-mow, where they disembark their goods and thence convey them on mules over a range of mountainous country inhabited by Shans (subject to Ava) into the Chinese province of Yunan (sic).⁵⁰

As M’Cosh explained this trade route, he also envisioned a plan for commercial activities in this region.

Considering the small extent of land that intervenes the navigable branches of the Brahmaputra, and the sources of the great rivers of Ava, of Martaban, of Cambodia, and of Nankin, an overland communication by means of a good road would be mutually beneficial to the three great nations whose territories there meet; and would

⁴⁸ Gunnel Cederlof, *Founding an Empire on India’s North-Eastern Frontier: Climate Commerce and Polity 1790-1840*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 84.

⁴⁹ Cederlof, *Founding an Empire on India’s North-Eastern Frontier*, p. 86-87.

⁵⁰ John M’Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1837), p. 11.

open a direct inlet for the importation of all the valuable productions of Northern Central Asia.⁵¹

In other words, M'Cosh pronounced the visions of 'free trade' and, linked the spirit of that vision to the connected geography between southeastern sub-Himalayan India, Burma, and China. In other words, his vision was connected the rationale of imperial expansion and the logic of "free trade" to one another. However, this vision was a distant dream as the East India Company, after losing its monopoly over Asian trade, was in no position to materialize it. But, by this time, the Company administration made an important discovery in eastern Assam. They discovered that the tea bush was indigenous to this region. Thereafter, the process of integrating northeast India into the global capitalist economy took a completely different turn. While founding the tea industry in Assam, the Company officials and the free traders made the best use of the connected geography between northeast India and China.

⁵¹ M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, p. 12.

Chapter 4: Founding the tea industry in the Brahmaputra Valley

In the early nineteenth century, as the East India Company was making an effort towards its territorial expansion in northeast India, a good number of European free traders also became active in the region. While some of them were trying to establish trade relations with lower Burma, others sought their fortune in the Brahmaputra valley. In the early 1820s, Robert Bruce, a former army official turned businessman, was searching for his fortune in eastern Assam with the hope of establishing some contact with Yunnan via land. By 1823, Bruce managed to establish contacts with the Singpho chief Beesa Gaum near Sadiya in eastern Assam. Interestingly, the Singphos used to grow the tea bush and they were regular users of the commodity. The Singphos introduced Bruce to their indigenous method of preparing tea. In fact, their method of preparation was quite different from the Chinese. Singphos used to “pluck the tender leaves, and dry them a little in the sun; some put them out in the dew, and then again in the sun” for “three successive days.” The other method of preparing tea among the Singphos was to put the leaves on a hot pan, “turn them about until quite hot, and place them into the hollow of a bamboo over the fire until it is full; then tie the end up with leaves, and hang the bamboo up in some smoky place in the hut.”⁵² This helped them to preserve the tea leaves for regular use throughout the year. They used to soak the dry leaves in hot water to prepare the drink. For Robert Bruce, this was not only a new discovery but also a golden opportunity. Soon, Bruce travelled to Yunnan, procured a few Chinese laborers, and got actively involved in developing an experimental tea plantation at Sadiya.⁵³ After the first

⁵² G. G. Sigmond, *Tea; its Effects, Medicinal and Moral*, (1839), p. 72

⁵³ Jayeeta Sharma, British Science, Chinese Skill and Assam Tea: Making Empire’s Garden”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, (43), Jan, 2007, p. 437-438.

Anglo-Burmese war, in accordance with the Treaty of Yandaboo, Sadiya officially became a part of the East India Company's territory. During this time, Charles Alexander Bruce, who happened to be a brother of Robert Bruce, was in the service of the Company's army. Incidentally, C. A. Bruce was appointed at Sadiya. C. A. Bruce's appointment offered a good support to Robert's plan. Subsequently, the Bruce brothers earnestly got involved into developing the experimental tea plantations.

However, during the first ten years of this experiment, the Bruce brothers did not inform any senior official of the East India Company about the developments at Sadiya. It was only in 1833, C. A. Bruce verbally informed Captain Francis Jenkins, the commissioner of lower Assam, about their experimental plantation.⁵⁴ But, back then Jenkins did not pay any attention to Bruce's information as the news of abolition of the East India Company's monopoly over China trade was yet to arrive in the eastern borderland of British India. Once the news of abolition arrived, the outlook of the Company officials changed dramatically. In 1834, William Bentinck, the Governor General of India speculatively informed the London office about the prospects of tea cultivation in India. Bentinck was quite uncertain about an exact location where the tea plantation could take off. He was also not very convinced by the reports presented to him by Nathaniel Wallich, the official botanist and the architect of Calcutta Botanical Garden. Wallich had tentatively informed Bentinck that in the foothills of the Himalaya there

⁵⁴ On December 20th 1836, Robert Bruce wrote to Captain Jenkins, "At the breaking of Burmah War, I offered my services to Mr. Scott then Agent to the Governor General, and I was appointed to command Gun-boats. As my command was at Sadiya, I was the first who introduced the tea seeds and plants and sent them to Mr. Scott and other officers below...and it was I who verbally informed you of it, and officially brought the subject to your notice in 1833, giving a description of the method of making tea by the natives. I was the first European who ever penetrated the forests and visited the tea tracts in British Sadiya, and brought away specimens of earth, fruit and flowers and first to discover numerous other tracts." Cited in H. A. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company, 1839-1953*, (Edinburgh: T & A Constable Ltd., 1957), p. 17.

should be a suitable location for the initial experiment. Based on Wallich's report, Bentinck made a wild guess, and suggested that there must be some congenial climate and soil "between Himalayas and Cape Comorin" for cultivation of tea. He further wrote, "it may be practicable to have from China cuttings of the true and the best descriptions of the plant, and knowledge and skill for its cultivation, and for the subsequent process of preparing the leaves for use."⁵⁵ As obvious, Bentinck was yet to grow out of the dependency syndrome on China tea. Thus, with a desire to undergo an apprenticeship under the Chinese, Bentinck suggested that, "an intelligent agent should be selected, who should go down to Penang and Singapore, and in conjunction with the authorities there, and most intelligent of the Chinese agents, should concert measures for obtaining the genuine plant."⁵⁶ For the East India Company officials in India, this was indeed a desperate moment. After all, abolition of the monopoly over China trade could potentially disrupt their triangular trade of opium and tea between India, China, and Britain. Financially, it was a huge threat to the Company's interests. Bentinck's report was just a representation on those concerns.

While ignorant Bentinck was still making arbitrary plans, the Tea Committee submitted its report on 15th of March 1834. The East Indian Company appointed the Tea Committee to conduct a survey of geological and climatic conditions across India for tea cultivation. The committee was constituted of a set of amateur botanists, geologists, and a few individuals from colonial administration, mostly handpicked from Calcutta. Tea Committee's initial surveys suggested that the lower hills and the valleys of the

⁵⁵ Minute by the Governor General, Calcutta, 24th January, British Parliamentary Papers, Tea Cultivation (India) p. 5.

⁵⁶ Minute by the Governor General, Calcutta, 24th January, p.6-7.

Himalayan range would be a suitable site for tea cultivation. It further said that, “next to them, those of our eastern frontier offer the best prospects, and after them the Nilgherry and other lofty mountains in southern and central India.”⁵⁷ The committee members were also informed about the discovery of several species of *Camellia* in the mountainous tracts of the northern and eastern frontier of British India. But, the most of the information that they received were more speculative than real. So the committee took a cautious stand and recommended that more information should be collected from China. However, they were hopeful about building a network with China. They suggested that:

We are informed, that for the last three or four years, vessels have been constantly employed by some of the English merchants in trading to the eastern and northern part of China...The Dutch succeeded in procuring several hundred Chinese, and abundance of plants and seed, for their experimental tea plantations at Java; and there are now several Europeans at Canton who have attained such proficiency in the language, that there would be no difficulty in explaining to intelligent natives the nature of the information, and the description of the people required.⁵⁸

In other words, a speculative plan for the experiment was charted out. Following this plan, in June 1834, the secretary of the Tea Committee G.J. Gordon sailed from Calcutta to gather information about tea cultivation and manufacturing. While Gordon was still away, in the month of December, the Tea Committee produced another report. This time, with all certitude, the committee confirmed that:

...the tea shrub is beyond all doubt indigenous to upper Assam, being found here through an extent of country of one month's march within the Honourable Company's territories, from Suddya and Beesa, to the Chinese frontier province of Yunnan, where the shrub is cultivated for the sake of its leaf. We have no hesitation in declaring this discovery which is due to the indefatigable researches of Captain Jenkins and Lieutenant Charlton, to be by far the most important (sic) and valuable

⁵⁷ India Revenue Consultations, Office of the Governor General of India, Calcutta, 12th May 1834, p. 16.

⁵⁸ India Revenue Consultations, 12th May 1834, p. 17.

that has ever been made on matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of this empire.⁵⁹

So, following the bureaucratic hierarchy, the tea committee gave the credit of discovering the tea bush to Jenkins and Charlton whereas the name of the Bruce brothers disappeared from the tea committee report. After two years of this confirmatory report, Captain Francis Jenkins came to know that the tea grown in the Brahmaputra valley was already a part of the commercial network with China. In 1836, a certain Shan Phookun reported to Captain Jenkins about the cultivation of tea in southwest of Nagaon District. The report, forwarded by Jenkins to Secretary of Government of India, stated that the tea grown in the Nowgong area was “very strong coarse and bitter in its wild taste. Its (sic) cultivated by the Pollang (subjects of Burmese King) race in these hills...The inhabitants cultivate it to a great extent as they have no other kind of cultivation and their livelihood chiefly depends on this.” Furthermore, it suggested that there was “a great demand for it as the Chinese merchants come and buy it up at 7/8 per mound in its moist state” and, it was “carried off by them on the backs of mules and bullocks. The average carried off yearly amounts to about 40000 mounds.”⁶⁰ As these reports made the Company official at Calcutta more and more convinced about the tea bush being indigenous to the Brahmaputra valley, they changed their next course of action.

As the Tea Committee no longer considered the China plan necessary, Gordon, who was still in China, was called back to India. Meanwhile, the results of Gordon’s efforts reached Calcutta in January 1835 in the form of a consignment of about 80,000

⁵⁹Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company 1839-1953*, p. 32.

⁶⁰Bodhisattva Kar, Bodhisattva Kar, “Energizing Tea, Enervating Opium: Culture of Commodities in Colonial Assam”, in Manas ray (ed.), *Space, Sexuality and Postcolonial Cultures* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, ENRECA papers series, 2002), p. 34-35.

seeds of the China plant.⁶¹ Nathaniel Wallich undertook the task of germinating the seeds in Calcutta Botanical Garden and, “the resulting plants were distributed, 20,000 to Assam, 20,000 to Kumaon and the neighboring hill districts and 2,000 to the Madras Presidency.”⁶² But, the news received on these plants from different provinces was rather disappointing. Out of the 2,000 plants sent to the Madras Presidency, not more than twenty plants were alive when the consignment arrived there. In the Kumaon hills, approximately 1,325 surviving plants were replanted. The report that reached Wallich from Assam said that: “Thirty four small boxes and two large ones, besides 31 pots were left behind at Bishnath, as they contained altogether only 213 good plants, the reminder having perished or being in a doubtful state, which enabled Major White to discharge one of the boats.”⁶³ In Assam, they put efforts to plant the surviving 8,000 seedlings. But, in another report coming in eighteen months later, an officer named William Griffiths said that, “having now sketched the fate of the nursery for Chinese plants” he was “naturally led to those of indigenous plants.”⁶⁴ In a nutshell, the whole plan to import the China seeds was completely unsuccessful. Griffiths, however, in his report mentioned that C.A. Bruce’s experimental plantation, the independent venture at Sadiya, was a great success where indigenous plants were grown with the help of imported Chinese labor. In other words, the theory for successful tea plantation in Assam was formulated—indigenous plants cultivated by skilled Chinese labor.

While the Company regime was making rapid developments in their plans towards tea cultivation in the region, Purandar Singha, the tributary Ahom king failed to deliver

⁶¹ H. A. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company 1839-1953*, p. 30.

⁶² Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company*, p. 31.

⁶³ Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company*, p.32.

⁶⁴ Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company*, p.33.

on his promise. In 1838, the last Ahom *Swargadeo* failed to produce the revenue of Rs. 50,000 as per the agreement. Subsequently, the Company regime brought eastern Assam under its direct administration. By 1838, the company officials also completed the land revenue assessments in both eastern and western Assam.⁶⁵ In other words, all the necessary administrative steps to encourage capital investments in commercial tea plantations were successfully completed. Predictably, the response from the metropole was fast and affirmative. On 12th of February, 1839, a group of merchants got together at 6 Great Winchester Street in London to discuss the prospects of investing capital on commercial tea plantations in Assam. These merchants immediately arrived on a consensus to invest in the tea plantations of Assam. The minutes of their first board meeting said:

Chinese authorities have frequently suspended our trade, and ordered the “Barbarians” as Englishmen are still popularly and unofficially styled, to quit the country, a proceeding which has often occasioned considerable inconvenience and embarrassment. Every merchant who is engaged in the tea trade must feel that it is carried on in the most humiliating circumstances, and be desirous of getting rid of a dependence on the “Celestial Empire” by submission to which he is alone enabled to carry on a profitable trade in an article which was once a luxury, but has now become a necessary of living. An opportunity now for the first time presents itself to the English merchant to render himself and his country independent of China in trade in tea.⁶⁶

Incidentally this was the time when the tensions towards the first Opium War were gradually building up. The Chinese authorities increased vigilance on the supply of opium from British India. Within that context, the display of jingoism by the collective of British merchants was an obvious reaction. Their identification of the new site of tea production as a space within the British, and outside the “Celestial Empire” also reminds

⁶⁵ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1991), p.140-142.

⁶⁶ H. A. Antrobus's *A History of the Assam Company 1839-1953*, p.36

us of Immanuel Wallerstein's formulation on the relationship between the state and the expansion of capitalist world economy. Wallerstein had argued that, "a capitalist system requires a very special relationship between economic producers and the holders of political power."⁶⁷ Capitalists need to "circumvent states hostile to their interests in favor of states friendly to their interests."⁶⁸ Certainly, the merchants who congregated at Winchester Street internalized such dynamics of political power quite well. On 13th February, they met once again and, passed a resolution to form a joint stock company, "with a capital of £500,000 in 10,000 shares of £50 pounds each of which 8,000 were to be allotted in Great Britain and 2,000 in India."⁶⁹ They called the new joint stock company as Assam Company.

However, during this time, a parallel development was under way in Calcutta. A group of Bengali businessman in collaboration with a few British traders formed a body called Bengal Tea Association. This business venture originated from the office of Carr, Tagore & Co. But, the Calcutta group's ability to invest capital was nothing compared to that of Assam Company. Soon, Carr, Tagore & Co found out that they had no other option apart from merging their venture with the Assam Company. Speaking about the Calcutta collective, the official historian of the Assam Company wrote: "One would have thought that the Bengal Tea Association, having put in their application in India for Government's properties earlier than the Assam Company, were in a stronger position to float their own concern, but perhaps the large Capital required for a commercial

⁶⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein, *World System Analysis: An Introduction*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 24.

⁶⁸ Wallerstein, *World System Analysis*, p. 24.

⁶⁹ H. A. Antrobus's *A History of the Assam Company 1839-1953*, p. 37.

undertaking was better raised in London.”⁷⁰ The official historian of the Assam Company explained it in the simplest possible way. Within the nineteenth-century hierarchical structure of the global capitalist economy, the merger of Carr, Tagore & Company into the Assam Company was not accidental but inevitable. Significantly, the Assam Company’s new business venture in the Brahmaputra valley was also a moment of divergence in economic activity in the Eurasian landmass. Britain, who had depended on Chinese tea for centuries, was about to produce tea within the territorial limits of its own empire. Obviously, the Assam Company merchants could not imagine investing capital on such a long distance business venture without relying on the East India Company’s colonial state in India. In other words, it was the actions of the East India Company’s colonial state that maintained “the rules of the market” and, shaped the nature of the “local, regional and long distance trade” to eventually produce a divergence in the production and exchange chain of tea as a commodity in the Eurasian landmass.⁷¹

As the process of capital investments in the Assam tea industry intensified, the East India Company administration framed land grant policies in the Brahmaputra valley by prioritizing the interests of the planters. In 1836, the government had set up a few experimental plantations in upper Assam. In 1840, two third of these plantations were transferred to the Assam Company. For the initial few years, the Assam Company was not liable to pay any rent to the government for these plantations. In 1838, the East India Company regime introduced the Wasteland Rules. The term wasteland was itself framed along the English utilitarian principles. Under the new rules, the land that was not

⁷⁰ Antrobus’s *A History of the Assam Company*, p. 40.

⁷¹ Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 9.

cultivated by the local peasants was labeled as wasteland. The Wasteland Rules also established the provisions for long-term lease of land. After these rules came into being, planters could apply for forty-five years' lease on the condition that a quarter of the land must be used for plantation within the first five years of the lease. Furthermore, "No grant for agricultural purpose could be made for less than 100 acres at a time and to one who did not possess capital or stock worth at least Rs. 3 per acre."⁷² In other words, it became extremely difficult for the local population to avail this opportunity. Only Europeans with capital could take the benefit of the new legal code.

However, in spite of framing flexible land grant policies, the colonial state could not attract the European investors much. Apart from the Assam Company's gradually expanding gardens, very few showed interest in investing money in the tea industry. As a result, in 1854, the officials at Fort William, Calcutta revised the land grant policies and increased the term of lease to ninety-nine years. Moreover, "minimum area of land for which one could apply was raised to 500 acres. Later the limit was reduced to 200 acres and made relaxable even to 100 acres in special case, if the native applicants could satisfy the collectors of their ability to bring" tenants from "outside of Assam."⁷³ In other words, founding the tea industry in Assam became a process of handing over the land of the region either to Europeans or to the new immigrants from other regions of India. So, unlike David Washbrook would like to believe, colonizing Assam was not the "logical outcome" of the region's "own history of capitalistic development." Nevertheless, the revision of land grant policies encouraged more Europeans to invest in the tea industry.

⁷² Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, (New Delhi: ICHR, 1977), p. 13.

⁷³ Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, p. 14.

During early years of the tea industry, the Assam Company was the only group who invested heavily in the tea plantations. But, by 1859, there were total 51 tea estates under different proprietors. In that year, the Jorehaut Tea Company also began its operations. Between 1841 and 1859, the Assam Company alone expanded its gardens from 2311 acres to 8,000 acres.⁷⁴

Parallel to these developments in the Brahmaputra valley, the colonial state also put its efforts to begin tea cultivation in the Barak valley. In 1856, Captain Francis Jenkins wrote to the officials at Fort William requesting for supply of tea seeds from Kumaon hills. Jenkins had received the information that, a certain Mr. Fortune had successfully managed to grow Chinese plants in the Kumaon hills. Jenkins was speculating about two possibilities. Firstly, he wanted to begin the tea plantations at Cacher. Secondly, he wanted to experiment with the Chinese variety and, see if green tea could be produced in the region. In his letter, Jenkins also informed that the number of people wanting to become tea planters in Assam was rapidly increasing and, he considered this as a good opportune moment to open a plantation at Cacher.⁷⁵ In fact, after the revision of the land grant policies, a good number of the East India Company officials gave up their jobs to become independent planters.⁷⁶ Considering this development, the officials at Calcutta decided to pursue Jenkins' plan. By 1857, seeds of Chinese Bohea tea were dispatched from Calcutta.

However, there were some security concerns regarding the Cacher plan. The officials posted at Cacher considered it difficult to administer those "wild districts" and

⁷⁴ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1991), p.159.

⁷⁵ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, East India (Tea Plantations), 1863, p. 3-4.

⁷⁶ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p.60-61.

therefore, they expressed doubts over opening a new government plantation in the area. Upon receiving these reports, the Calcutta officials suddenly changed their mind. They now suggested that, “a Government plantation is quite unnecessary for the encouragement of the cultivation of tea in Cachher.”⁷⁷ However, they were quite open to the idea of encouraging private players. So such was the nature of the colonial policies of risk management. Handing over Cachher to private parties meant an escape from any accountability. Fortunately, the plan worked well for the colonial administration as much to their encouragement, “the cultivation of the tea plant in Cachher was extensively and vigorously prosecuted by numerous parties.”⁷⁸ The contract of beginning the tea plantation at Cachher eventually went to Mr. Williamson who already possessed two plantations in eastern Assam.⁷⁹ Apart from this development at Cachher, the colonial state put concerted efforts towards opening a new plantation at the Chittagong Hills. By 1863, they completed the land assessments and, decided to hand over the area to the private players.⁸⁰ So, by the mid 1860s, the tea industry in northeast India was flourishing. As a result, the colonial state’s frontier policy also changed with time. The East India Company’s vision of connecting the Brahmaputra valley to Yunnan via land appeared as inconsequential to the British Raj. Instead, the Raj gradually became unwilling to directly administer the hills between the Brahmaputra valley and the Irrawaddy valley. In 1873, the Government of India framed the Inner Line Policy and declared that the foothills were the limits of the British territory.

⁷⁷ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, East India (Tea Plantations), 1863, p. 9.

⁷⁸ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, East India (Tea Plantations), 1863, p. 8.

⁷⁹ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, East India (Tea Plantations), 1863, p.8.

⁸⁰ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, East India (Tea Plantations), 1863, p.29.

At the same time, it is worth noticing that the tea industry in southeastern sub-Himalayan region took off solely on European capital. The new structure of tea production came into being without any significant appropriation of the pre-colonial local economic structures the region. Moreover, there was little participation of the indigenous population in the processes of founding the tea industry. During the early days of the tea industry, the local peasants of the Brahmaputra valley refused to work in the tea industry. Therefore, in order to push the peasants to work in the plantations, the colonial government designed stringent land revenue policies.⁸¹ However, these coercive mechanisms failed. Due to abundance of land in the region, the peasants could continuously shift their base and escape the new taxation regime. Eventually, apart from a handful of Kacharis, the colonial officials could not succeed in bringing in the local peasants to the tea industry.⁸² Subsequently, in 1859, the colonial government introduced the indentured labor system through the Workman's Breach of Contract Act XIII 1859. Soon, four hundred laborers were recruited from the areas of Benares, Ghazipur, Chotanagpur, and Bihar in northern India. In the years to follow, their numbers steadily increased and, by 1867-68, 22,800 indentured laborers migrated to the tea plantations of Assam. By 1901, their numbers increased to 645,000.⁸³ In other words, the tea industry was founded in northeast India without any real participation of the people from the region. So the process of integration of northeast India into the global capitalist economy was quite different from rest of India. Unlike the village economy of southern India, there was clearly no "over-determined interactions among 'internal' and 'external' forces of

⁸¹ For a detailed discussion on this see Guha, *Planter's Raj to Swaraj* (1991) and Sharma, *Empire's Garden* (2011).

⁸² Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 80-86.

⁸³ Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, p. 81.

change” in northeast India. At the same time, there was no process of appropriation by the colonialists as the region was integrated into the global capitalist economy. The history of southeastern sub-Himalayan region plainly subscribes to the “chronicles of a capitalist world economy based on European imperial expansion.”

Chapter 5: A region in a Mobile world

By 1840, southeastern sub-Himalayas became a major producer of an important global commodity. In other words, the region was integrated into the global capitalist economy through the production and exchange of tea. As British colonial capitalism restructured the economic activities in the region, a hitherto secluded region suddenly appeared on the global landscape of capital. The mobile capitalist world absorbed an isolated region into the orbit of its movement. As the frontier of the capitalist space moved forward, the geography and territoriality of southeastern sub-Himalayan region found new meanings. Northeast India's appearance on the global stage through its inclusion into the British India reshaped the spatial location of the region. The region could now be identified differently with respect to its regional, imperial, and the global spatiality.

Economically, northeast India entered into interdependent relationships of the global capitalist economy. As the tea industry in the region began to flourish, it started affecting the prices of the commodity in the London markets. By 1841, the Assam Company started exporting its produce. Tea, produced in Assam, was first brought to Calcutta before loading it to the ships heading towards London. On 7th December 1841, Helen Mary, the ship carrying the first consignment of Assam tea arrived in Britain. The first consignment containing 10,201lb finally came up for sale on 26th January 1842. The price range of the first lot was between 1s. 10d to 4s.3d per lb.⁸⁴ At that time, the retail price of Chinese Bohea tea was over 3s per lb. So, the dealers and the grocers selling Assam tea could extract a wide margin of profit. The following year Assam Company's

⁸⁴ H. A. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company 1839-1953*, p. 272.

production increased considerably and, it reached almost 30,000 lb.⁸⁵ However, the quantity of green tea produced in the Assam Company plantations was very insignificant and, they were in no position to compete with the Chinese exports. Green tea production was more labor intensive and the cost of production was 20 to 30 percent more than the black tea.⁸⁶

However, the black tea exported from Assam changed the consumption culture of the commodity in Britain. After the arrival of black tea from India, “working-class families were now able to afford tea as their main beverage.”⁸⁷ Moreover, Black tea mixed with sugar became popular because of its nutritional value. To put it in the words of Sidney Mintz, the new habit of the working-class to drink tea became symbolic of the “national vigor” of a leading industrial nation.⁸⁸ However, it was possible because of the increased supply and the gradually decreasing price of tea in the London markets. In 1811, the average supply of tea in Britain was 1lb. 4oz. per head and, the average price was 6s. 8d. per pound. By 1821 the price went down to 5s 8d. and in 1831 it became 4s. 6d. But, consumption per head remained almost the same as 1811. In 1841, the price per pound was 2d. lower than 1831 and the consumption per head increased to 1lb. 6oz. By 1851, the average price had fallen down to 3s. 4.75d and, the consumption per head had increased to 2lb. 11oz. By 1861, the price had fallen down to 1s. 10.5d. the consumption per head increased to 3lb. 15oz. In 1861, the total quantity of tea that entered the British markets was 123, 000,000lb. In 1801, the average rate that the consumers paid per pound of tea was 1s. 2.5d. In 1811 the prices went up to 3s. 4d.. But, by 1821 it went down to

⁸⁵ Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company*, p.272.

⁸⁶ Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company*, p.276.

⁸⁷ Saberi, *Tea: A Global History*, p. 106.

⁸⁸ Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The place of Sugar in Modern History*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 121.

2s. 9.5d. and by 1831, the rate was 2s. 2.75d.. By 1841 it further went down 2s. 2.25d. The prices remained at the same level in 1851. In 1861, the average price was 2s.10.5d and, in 1871 it further went down to 1s.10.5d.⁸⁹ In other words, increased supply of Indian tea and the continuously decreasing price of the commodity made tea-drinking a part of the dietary habits of the working-class Britons.

Furthermore, as a result of the extension of tea plantations from 1856 onward, Britain not only became self-sufficient in tea production but it also started exporting the commodity to other regions of the world. It is worth mentioning that, by 1860, the British Raj in India successfully opened the Kumaon Hill tracts in the North Western Province and, the Niligiri hills in the Madras Presidency for commercial tea cultivation. The 1860s, witnessed a tremendous increase in the supply of Indian tea into the British market. In 1866, it was reported that, “The Board of Trade returns show a remarkable increase in the quantity of tea entered for home consumption during the first five months” of that year. Simultaneously, in the 1860s, Britain started exporting tea to other world region. During the years 1864, 1865 and, 1866 Britain’s tea export were 13,000,000, 11,000,000 and 10,000,000 pounds respectively.⁹⁰ By 1890s, Britain was exporting large quantities of tea to Germany, the Baltic Provinces, and South America.

As Britain’s tea industry in India became global, certain process of product customization also became a part of the marketing strategy. A description of London tea warehouse, published in 1890, suggested that packaging of tea was done to meet the local demands of the importing regions. Careful attention was paid while “packaging for the

⁸⁹ Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company*, p.276.

⁹⁰ Consumption of in United Kingdom, *Journal of Society of Arts*, August 23rd, 1872, p. 574.

voyage, and subsequent inland transit.” At the same time, “elegance of design and pictorial display”, “the wrappings and labels embellishing the packets and setting forth the attractive charms of the various judicious blends and mixings” were integral part of product customization.⁹¹ To put it differently, the scenes at the tea warehouses in London were representative of the newfound globality of the commodity. Most important, Britain, which was dependent on China tea till the beginning of the nineteenth century, could now export tea to different regions of the world due to its flourishing tea industry in India. To put it another way, southeastern sub-Himalayan region made its entry into the production and exchange chain of a global commodity through the British imperial connections.

Furthermore, Britain’s tea industry in India transformed the state of affairs in the processes of tea production and distribution globally. In 1870, China’s total tea exports were 184,087, 000 lbs whereas the Indian exports were 13,046,000 lbs. However, this situation changed significantly by the end of the century. By 1900, China exported a total of 184, 530,000 lbs whereas the exports from India increased to 192,310,000 lbs. So, by the end of nineteenth century there was clearly some stagnancy in the Chinese tea exports while the exports from India increased exponentially. By 1920, the situation on the Chinese side deteriorated unimaginably. During this period China exported only 40,846,000 lbs of tea while the Indian exports increased to 287, 525,000 lbs.⁹² Speaking about this development Robert Gardella observed that, “Within a generation (1870-1900), Chinese black tea had largely ceded their greatest foreign market—the United Kingdom

⁹¹ “A London Tea Warehouse” in *Chamber’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, September, 1890, p. 584.

⁹² Robert Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains: Fujian and the China Tea Trade, 1757-1937*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1994), p.111.

and the British dominions—to India and Ceylon.”⁹³ From 1886 onward, British import of China tea gradually declined and, by 1896, it became almost negligible. In 1886, Britain imported 104,226,000 lbs of China tea whereas the import from India was 68,420,000 lbs. However, by 1896, these figures changed dramatically to 19,800,000 lbs and 122,900,000 lbs respectively.⁹⁴ As China tea lost its global market to Indian tea its effects began to show on the traditional tea growing regions of China.

The Fujian province in China produced tea for the domestic market since the time of the Tang Dynasty. Tea exports from Fujian was commercially important before the Opium War and, it became even more so in the in the mid and late nineteenth centuries. In 1830, approximately 22,000,000 lbs of tea was exported to European market from northwest Fujian.⁹⁵ However, by the turn of the nineteenth century, this tea-producing region entered into a crisis. Robert Gardella observed that the intensive production of cash crops for foreign markets negatively affected the peasants of Fujian over time. Although exports from the region grew steadily up to the 1880s, thereafter, high transaction costs negatively affected the producers. Moreover, the highly decentralized system required participants to continually negotiate and renegotiate deals. On top of that, the changing market conditions and the downward pressure on prices added troubles to the tea growers of Fujian.⁹⁶ However, in contrast to the developments in Fujian, from the early 1880s, the Assam Company started exporting tea to the American and the Australian market. Between 1881 and 1890, production in the Assam Company gardens was consistent. During this period, the average production was over 2,000,000 lbs.

⁹³ Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains*, p. 110.

⁹⁴ Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains*, p. 132.

⁹⁵ Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains*, p. 117.

⁹⁶ Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains*, p. 118-124.

Furthermore, in 1890, the Assam Company expanded its gardens and, added 1,689 acres of land to its possession.⁹⁷ In other words, as the Assam Company was gradually growing from strength to strength the peasants in Fujian were heading towards a crisis.

⁹⁷ Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company*, p. 171.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

To cut the long story short, British colonial intrusion into southeastern sub-Himalayan India was certainly not the “logical outcome” of the region’s “own history of capitalistic development.” In other words, David Washbrook, quite injudiciously generalized the story of northern and peninsular India to a broader geo-political region, which is identified as “South Asia.” However, I am not inclined to subscribe to the position of Immanuel Wallerstein either. Here, my objective was to rethink the history of northeast India’s integration into the global capitalist economy through the conceptual problem that the South Asianists and Wallerstein had collectively posed. The South Asianists’ disagreements with Wallerstein’s formulation of world system theory stand as an independent critique by its own merit. But, while establishing their position, these area studies specialists collectively share a sense of provinciality. Their shared sense of provinciality effectively obfuscates the practice of writing the connected histories of global capitalist economy. To explain the integration process of regions such as southeastern sub-Himalayan region, one must do away with such a sense of provinciality. Of course, it is extremely important to make a distinction between the universal and the particular. But, the practice of privileging the particular must not become an exercise in seeing the spatial dynamics of global capitalism with respect to some provincial imagination. In fact, it is provincial imagination that reifies fuzzy historical constructions such “South Asia” as a geo-political region. I think, to pluralize the narratives of globalization of capital, it is useful to write the connected histories of a region rather than adhering to the vague area studies agendas.

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